

Toronto

Family reeling as senior dies of malnutrition, not COVID-19, inside long-term care home

Pietro Bruccoleri's daughters say they were stopped from removing him from the home before his death

[Chris Glover](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jun 09, 2020 12:57 PM ET | Last Updated: June 9, 2020



Rina Di Salvo, left, and her sister Mary Bruccoleri, right, hold a photo of their father, Pietro. The coroner's report into his death at a Toronto-area long term care home lists his cause of death as 'inanition,' which means exhaustion caused by lack of nourishment. (Grant Linton/CBC)

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Pietro Bruccoleri died late last month at an embattled Ontario long-term care home where 23 seniors have succumbed to COVID-19, but it wasn't the virus that killed him — it was exhaustion caused by malnutrition.

Now his family is wracked with grief over his loss, and wondering how the conditions inside Woodbridge Vista Care Community in Vaughan could have gotten bad enough for this to happen.

Family members say when they rushed to Bruccoleri's bedside on May 29, they found him lying in a sweltering room without any air conditioning.

"We did not expect the neglect," said his eldest daughter, Rina Di Salvo, 55.

"We're so disgusted and heartbroken," said his youngest daughter, Mary Bruccoleri, 47.

Bruccoleri's family told CBC News the 82-year-old was suffering from advanced dementia, and so he was moved into the long-term care home just north of Toronto a year ago.

Relatives say that prior to the pandemic, they had no complaints about his care.

But in May, Bruccoleri was moved out of his room because nearby residents tested positive for COVID-19.

"We feel that ever since my dad moved to another room, he was so abandoned and everything just went downhill from there," said Mary Bruccoleri.





Mary Bruccoleri hugs and kisses her father, Pietro, at his nursing home in September 2019. Pietro suffered from advanced dementia, but otherwise his family was consistently told he was doing 'fine,' even as COVID outbreak in the home intensified. (Submitted by Mary Bruccoleri)

The outbreak soon spiralled out of control at the 224-bed facility. Now, the province has seized control, turned management over to a local hospital and called in the Canadian Armed Forces to help.

'His room was like a sauna,' daughter says

Brucoleri says her father was tested for the virus five times, but the results always came back negative.

After weeks of being told by the nursing home staff their father was "fine," the family received a call that he was dying. They raced to the home, but he was "already gone," Di Salvo said.

"His room was like a sauna but he was very cold, very stiff," she said, fighting back tears. "We left him three months ago plump and rosy in the cheeks and eating like a champ. When we walked in, he was skin and bone."

- [Private long-term care executive turfed after mocking families in online call](#)

A coroner's report listed Brucoleri's cause of death as "inanition," which means "exhaustion caused by lack of nourishment."

"We were devastated," Di Salvo said.

Family members rallied and protested outside Woodbridge Vista Care Community on June 4 calling for government help. (Grant Linton/CBC)

In a statement to CBC News, Sienna Senior Living, which operates Woodbridge Vista Care Community, said it "cannot speak about individual cases".

"We want to assure the families of our residents that we are working hard to ensure that each of our long-term care homes is able to meet and surpass health authority standards," the statement read.

"We are closely monitoring all residents and continue to provide supports in all areas, including ensuring the health and nutrition of our residents."

Sienna did not respond when asked why the family reported it was so hot inside the facility.

The company is [facing legal action](#) over its COVID-19 response at other nursing homes.

A rare cause of death

Mount Sinai geriatrician Dr. Barry Goldlist, who is also a professor of medicine at the University of Toronto, said he doesn't remember ever seeing inanition listed on a coroner's report.

Malnutrition is not rare for patients with advanced dementia, he said — but added he would want to see more information about Brucoleri's condition leading up to his death.

"My guess would be that when they looked at the body that they were struck by how malnourished it looked," said Goldlist, who did not see the body himself.

The family's description of the room as a "sauna" is particularly troubling, because older people are more likely to become dehydrated in heat, Goldlist said.

Compounding the family's grief is the fact that in April, Brucoleri's doctor gave the option to take him to a hospital.

"When we got to the nursing home we weren't allowed in, and the director of care and head nurse stopped us, and told us that they felt that my father didn't need to go to the hospital, that they had everything in place to look after him there," Di Salvo said.

- [**Canadian military to help long-term care home struggling with COVID-19 in Vaughan**](#)

Then on May 31, two days after Bruccoleri died, Woodbridge Vista announced 18 residents were being taken to hospital because "the level of care required for them exceeded that provided at a long-term care home." Not all of those patients had COVID-19.

Last week, the Bruccoleri sisters held a funeral for their father.

"Instead of saying goodbye, all I kept saying to my dad is how sorry I was. I feel like we failed him," Di Salvo said.

Report of filthy conditions

Bruccoleri's family isn't the only one sounding the alarm about conditions inside the facility.

Lucia Fracassi's mother, Carmela, died at Woodbridge Vista on May 25. She had also tested negative for COVID-19.

When Fracassi was allowed into her mom's room to say goodbye, she was "shocked" to see her frail condition, she told CBC News.

Lucia Fracassi, right, poses with her mother Carmela, who passed away May 25 in Woodbridge Vista Care Community. Despite dying in the middle of a COVID-19 outbreak at the home, Carmela tested negative for the virus. (Submitted by Lucia Fracassi)

The room was so hot that Fracassi and her husband quickly tried to put damp clothes on her mother to cool her down.

"We were wilting, I can't imagine her," said Fracassi.

Fracassi's husband, Frank Nardone, said the room was "filthy."

"Neglect, dehydration, and a broken heart, that's what she passed of," he said.

They have yet to see a coroner's report listing her official cause of death.

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